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SUBJECT: Romania Election Update: Timisoara Coalition Agreement Sparks Protests

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On December 1, the Social Democratic Party (PSD), the National Liberal Party (PNL), and the small, anti-communist National Christian Democratic Peasants' Party (PNTCD) signed a "Partnership for Timisoara," whose main provision is joint support for PSD presidential candidate Mircea Geoana in the December 6 runoff. Their use of the historical main square in Timisoara - where the 1989 Revolution began - triggered anti-PSD demonstrations in Timisoara itself, Bucharest, and several other Romanian cities. PDL denied any involvement in organizing the protests, while PSD and PNL warned that the protests may be precursors of post-election street disturbances orchestrated by Basescu and PDL. End Summary.

HEATED RHETORIC AND PROTESTS

¶2. (SBU) On December 1, Romania's National Day, PNL chairman Crin Antonescu, PSD chairman and presidential candidate Mircea Geoana, PNTCD chairman Radu Sarbu, Timisoara Mayor Gheorghe Ciuhandu (PNTCD), and PSD-PNL's proposed Prime Minister and Sibiu Mayor Klaus Iohannis signed a "Partnership for Timisoara" pledging support for Geoana in the December 6 presidential runoff. In addition, the PSD and PNTCD signed a separate agreement whereby the two parties commit to a historical reconciliation and express their support for Geoana. (Note: PNTCD (Peasants' Party) was a historical rival of the communist party and its post-1989 successors, and Geoana had pushed for the reconciliation to boost his image as a uniter. When unveiling the PSD-PNTCD agreement, PNTCD's Radu Sarbu announced that the late, revered PNTCD leader Corneliu Coposu would have blessed it. Coposu was the leader of the PNTCD from 1989 until his death in 1995. He had spent 17 years in communist prisons and is unanimously considered the symbol of anti-communism in post-1989 Romania. For many Romanians, postulating his approval of a PSD partnership with Timisoara, site of the first demonstrations in the 1989 Revolution, amounts to taking his name in vain. A prominent participant in the December 1989 Revolution, Ion Caramitru, resigned his PNTCD membership to protest the reference to Coposu. End Note.) In their addresses, political leaders described incumbent President Basescu as a former member of the communist nomenklatura and said that voting for Basescu was tantamount to voting for communism.

¶3. (U) The signing ceremony was followed by an election gathering in the local opera house, relayed to the public by large screens hung on the facade of the building. The PSD-PNL-PNTCD political leaders had to cancel plans to address a group of PSD supporters brought into the Opera Square after approximately 3,000 Timisoara residents started a counter-demonstration in the plaza. Local police separated the two groups and there were reports they used tear gas to keep them apart. Geoana, Antonescu, and their companions left the building through the backdoor amid boos, chants of "Down with communism!" and cries for them to come out and face the crowd. Soon afterwards, similar smaller-scale demonstrations started in Bucharest, Brasov, Cluj, Targoviste and several other cities. All ended peacefully.

¶4. (U) PSD and PNL leaders blamed Basescu's PDL for staging the counter-demonstrations. PDL leaders and Basescu denied any association, although several PDL leaders were reportedly spotted at the gatherings. Antonescu and Geoana warned that the

counter-demonstrations could be a precursor to street disturbances that Basescu and the PDL would engineer if they lost the election, in order to pave the way for challenging the election outcome.

WHY THE FUSS?

15. (SBU) The multi-ethnic Western Romanian city of Timisoara was the cradle of the 1989 Revolution and for many Romanians remains a symbol of anti-communism. In memory of those events, a city ordinance bans political gatherings in the Opera Square. Yet the municipality allowed the display of a huge Geoana billboard on an adjacent building, as well as a banner with the caption "Every 20 years we dump a dictator" (alluding to Basescu). Timisoara civil society leaders described counter-demonstrators as angry over the politicization of the revolution. Basescu, who in 2006 formally condemned communism, remains popular in the region, while the PSD, the modern-day successor to the communist party, is on much less solid ground there.

COMMENT

16. (SBU) Independent observers characterized the Timisoara PSD-PNL event as an ill-advised move, but it seems unlikely to sway significant numbers of voters to switch sides. The extent to which PDL helped orchestrate the protests remains unclear, but the PSD-PNL insinuations that Timisoara was a PDL dress-rehearsal for post-election disturbances seem dubious. This series of events, meant to boost Geoana's image as a uniter, served only to further polarize the electorate.

END COMMENT